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Sri Lanka to end use of heavy weapons in war against Tamil Tigers

No sign of any let-up in fighting in no-fire zone Military had previously denied using air strikes



Civilians who recently fled an area held by the Tamil Tigers at a refugee camp near Vavuniya, northern Sri Lanka. Photograph: Reuters

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The Sri Lankan government yesterday announced it was ending the use of air and artillery strikes in its war with the Tamil Tigers, after weeks of denying that it was using such tactics.

Under intense international pressure to end the fighting, the government claimed combat operations had reached their conclusion and it would now concentrate on rescuing civilians. However, there was no sign of an end to the fighting, which has claimed the lives of at least 6,000 civilians in the last three months.

The statement appeared to contradict previous claims by the military that it had not been using

heavy weapons.

It came a day after the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) announced a unilateral ceasefire, allegedly to allow civilians to leave the no-fire zone, a tiny coastal strip no larger than four square miles, where tens of thousands of people remain trapped by the fighting.

With the UN's top humanitarian official, John Holmes, already in the country and Britain's foreign minister, David Miliband, expected tomorrow, along with his French and Swedish counterparts, both sides appear keen to secure a propaganda advantage. But reports from the ground suggested the statements had little impact on the conduct of the war. The military said it was continuing to pursue the LTTE and heavy fighting was reported inside the no-fire zone.

A doctor working in the zone, Thangamutha Sathiyamoorthy, said there had been air strikes on the south Mullivaikkal area around 12.40pm and 1.10pm and artillery fired into the north Mullivaikkal area at around 5.40pm. Both areas are inside the no-fire zone. The government has accused Sathiyamoorthy of acting as a mouthpiece for the LTTE.

In a statement, the government said: "Our security forces have been instructed to end the use of heavy calibre guns, combat aircraft and aerial weapons which could cause civilian casualties."

John Holmes, the UN undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs, said: "I hope that the idea of not using heavy weapons will genuinely be respected, which I am afraid has not been the case in the past."

He also criticised the LTTE, saying it had given no indication that it would allow civilians to leave the area. "These people are in mortal danger," he said.

A government spokesman said that the decision signalled "the nearing victory of one of the world's most successful battles against terrorism". He said: "It is a decision that displays the genuine will of the Sri Lankan government to rescue its citizens from terrorism."

A military spokesman, Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara, later insisted that air strikes and artillery had not been directed at areas in which civilians had taken shelter. But he did confirm for the first time that those weapons had been used against the LTTE during the fighting in recent weeks. "We have been using them outside the safety zone," he said.

Pictures have shown large plumes of smoke rising from inside the no-fire zone, consistent with the use of high explosives. Brigadier Nanayakkara said the smoke could have been the result of the LTTE setting fire to civilians' tents. "Smoke can come from anything," he said.

The government claims that no more than 20,000 civilians remained inside the no-fire zone, although UN officials have suggested that the true figure could be as many as 150,000.

The reports can not be verified because journalists and humanitarian staff have been denied independent access to the area where the fighting is taking place.

EU foreign ministers yesterday urged Sri Lanka's government and the LTTE to agree an immediate ceasefire to allow the UN to organise an evacuation of the remaining civilians. "It is very, very important that we follow through on the government's welcome announcement,"

Miliband said. "This is a humanitarian crisis that needs to be tackled with real urgency."

Gordon Brown was reported to have telephoned the Sri Lankan president, Mahinda Rajapakse, on Sunday to pledge £2.5m for humanitarian assistance for the displaced civilians.

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